

Book Reviews

Repp, Martin

Höners religiöses Denken. Eine Untersuchung zu Strukturen religiöser Erneuerung.
Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005, 592 pp.

The title of this major new work by Martin Repp could be translated into English as “Höner’s Religious Thought; An Investigation into Structures of Religious Renewal”, and this title already says a great deal, quite precisely, about the approach which the author takes. First, the book is above all about the religious *thought* of Höner (1133-1212), and not mainly about his life or activities. The focus is therefore somewhat different from that of Christoph Kleine’s similarly substantial work in German, *Höners Buddhismus des Reinen Landes; Reform, Reformation oder Häresie* (1996), which focused on the hagiography of Höner. Second, the title also reflects the author’s interest in analysing “structures” of religious renewal, by which is meant patterns which can also be documented, comparatively, elsewhere. After a comprehensive presentation of Höner’s thought in its own right, the work therefore concludes by drawing a comparison with that of Martin Luther. This comparison focuses on the way in which, in the thought-patterns of each of these two thinkers respectively, the different constitutive elements fit together and determine each other. Repp emphasises the way in which the attempt to resubjectivise religious experience leads to an accentuation, but at the same time a narrowing down of the crucial focus of faith. Yet there is also a contrast in that Martin Luther moved far more decisively than Höner in reshaping institutionalised religion in accordance with his spiritual perceptions. There is therefore an analytical intention here which places the book firmly in the field of the systematic and comparative study of religions. Since it is in origin a “habilitation thesis”, submitted in the subject area of History of Religions and Missiology at the Faculty of Theology at Heidelberg, Germany, a certain level and style of post-doctoral research is implied. At the same time the very valuable survey sections which precede the discussion of the thought of Höner himself combine to lend an encyclopaedic quality to the whole. With this publication, added to that of Christoph Kleine mentioned above, there is really no excuse for German readers not to discover anything they need to know about Höner. On the other hand, it may be said that English language scholarship on the subject has been rather left behind, and indeed it is critically assessed in Repp’s opening chapter which discusses the current state of research.

The book is spread out into five major sections. These are unequal in length - a fact which, though not itself problematic, is unfortunately not optically reflected in the table of contents. The discussion of the state of research covers just a few pages, partly because of the paucity of western writing on the subject but partly because Japanese scholarship is not appraised here, though it is drawn upon later. This reflects the old problem about when knowledge counts as knowledge. Who has to know it? Or in what language must it be stated in order to count as being “known”?

Who “discovered” America? Or who first “knew” that the Mahayana sutras do not stem directly from the mouth of the Buddha himself? One might say that the state of knowledge depends on the karma of the addressees of an information process, in this case the Faculty of Theology at the University of Heidelberg. There, a critical review of western research might be expected. Similarly, it was presumably thought necessary for the same readership to have a very long second section, running to more than two hundred pages, which sets out the development of Pure Land Buddhist thought up until the time of Hōnen himself. This includes an up-to-date introduction to the basic “three sutras” of the Pure Land tradition (pointing out that one of them was probably composed in China), an introduction to the emergence of this tradition as a distinct stream in China with special reference to the important figure of Shandao (Japanese Zendo), and another introduction to the further developments in Japan up to and including Hōnen’s intellectual predecessor Genshin and the latter’s important writing, the *Ōjyōshū*. In the third section (the book does not really have “chapters”) there follows an account of Hōnen’s life and times which also takes up about seventy-five pages. Hōnen’s religious thought, the main subject, is then treated over more than two hundred further pages. This section takes up very little space in the table of contents, but this is because, oddly, the sub-headings seem to fizzle out here. We find here however a truly substantial examination of Hōnen’s central work, the *Senchakushū*, consisting of a detailed summary and an extensive commentary. In a sense therefore it may be regarded as the hard core of the book. Finally, the comparison with Luther is packed into just fifteen pages. While this appears at first sight to be the conclusion of the work as a whole, we should not overlook section 4.4, on Hōnen’s thought in the context of his own times, which is a concluding historical assessment prior to the comparative reflections. So there are really two kinds of conclusion, one internal to Hōnen’s system and one external to it. Although the book is already quite long enough as it is, for any purposes, this leaves open the question as to how conclusions about the significance of anybody’s “thought” should or could be pitched. What about comparing Hōnen with his immediate and equally influential disciple Shinran, for example, who is only mentioned three times, especially as the latter has himself also been compared with Luther? Or what about the significance ascribed to Hōnen’s thought in later times in Japan, or in the Japanese Buddhism of today? Of course, asking further questions is quite easy, and we should always be grateful in any book for the extensive answers given to the questions posed there.

It should be recognised that Repp’s commentary on the *Senchakushū* includes at the same time, step by step, a review of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, that is, the history of the way in which this central writing influenced others or was criticised by them, especially by Jōkei and Myōe, in defence of other orthodoxies. This is a fascinating way of reading the *Senchakushū*. We have first the dialectical relationship of Hōnen with the wider tradition, summed up in the very concept of “selection”, that is the selection (*senchaku*) of the *nenbutsu*, the practice of the calling of the name of Amida as *opposed* to other practices. This is followed by the equally dialectical response of those who regarded such a narrowing as a betrayal (which is why Kleine in his

writing had focused on the notion of “heresy”). These critical interactions are typical of the whole mode of “religious thought” which seeks to seize and bring out the quintessential meaning of a received tradition, Buddhist or any other, thereby handing it on effectively. This is what Repp has in mind when he speaks of *Erneuerung* (renewal), while he realises that the process of renewal itself throws up the questions of consistency and authority, and whether a religiously inspired *selection* really *seizes* the whole or, as its critics suggest, subtracts from it. Religious renewal, which sounds harmless, is therefore always a critical enterprise which forces open all the fundamental questions about the scope and nature of the tradition in question. The parallel with the Christian reformation led by Luther is therefore very instructive and will no doubt continue to exercise specialists in the study of religions for a long time to come. Christian systematic theologians might also find it very instructive to take note of this fine study of the inner workings of an otherwise very different religious tradition. Martin Repp’s approach is informed by his knowledge of Christian theology, though not in any way distorted by it. That means that there is no theological prejudice, while at the same time the proposed comparison is placed firmly on the table. But even without this intellectual thrust, the volume includes a massive factual orientation, together with all the required Sino-Japanese characters for proper nouns and other special terminology. Thus it is a splendid general guide to all of the various elements which are needed for any further studies of Hönen’s religious thought.

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Japans Karneval der Krise – Eejanaika und die Meiji-Renovation.

Erfurter Reihe zur Geschichte Asiens Bd. 6.

München: Iudicium Verlag 2003, 497 pp.

A widespread assumption is that scholarly and entertaining literature are mutually exclusive. That this must not necessarily be the case is proven in the present publication. The amusement is due to the historical material which the authors makes accessible in a large part of his book. This study treats the *eejanaika* movement in Japan during the years 1867/68. *Eejanaika* was the slogan of crazy mass movements abruptly appearing and quickly vanishing in various regions. The slogan may be rendered as “Isn’t it [the craze] okay?!” or more freely as “anything goes” (p. 352). These events turned the world for brief periods upside-down. For this reason the author uses the Western interpretative term “carnival” in the title and applies it later for heuristic reasons. As the title further indicates, these movements accompanied the drastic transition from the Edo or Tokugawa period to the modernization of the Meiji renovation.